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Language Teacher Wellbeing
in the Private School Context: A Case Study

Abstract

Language teacher wellbeing in the private education sector has almost been completely neglected in research. This study examines a well-functioning institution in the private sector and analyzes the systemic and contextual factors that contribute to the flourishing of its teachers. The case study explores the wellbeing of English language instructors by means of open questionnaires, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. The findings reveal a number of facets contributing to positive teacher wellbeing at the systemic, institutional level, such as corporate culture, policies, organization, management, opportunities for professional growth, and social life, as well as adequate resources, and good physical working conditions. Most good practice emerging from the research is universal and can be implemented by language institutions in all contexts. However, some variables that affect language teacher wellbeing at this workplace are specific to the nature of the institution and, therefore, could not be put into practice elsewhere.

Keywords: private sector, positive psychology, teachers, wellbeing, positive institutions, language education

Teacher wellbeing is essential for an educators' ability to cope with the everyday extensive emotional labor which is an integral part of their profession (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Additionally, it is linked with student wellbeing, outcomes, and achievement (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021). Language teacher wellbeing is worth even more consideration due to the additional stressors inherent in foreign or second language instruction (Mercer, 2020b; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). Yet, this aspect of education has not been researched sufficiently. Furthermore, except for Mercer's (2020b) and Budzińska's (2021) studies, there is no research on the wellbeing of language educators working in the private sector despite the fact that this sector plays

a crucial role in foreign language education globally, particularly in learning English as a foreign language.

Recently Babic et al. (2022) examined factors supporting teacher wellbeing in relation to the workplace. With the exception of their study, existing research into language teacher wellbeing focuses mainly on negative aspects, that is, an absence of wellbeing. Since wellbeing lies at the center of positive psychology, whose focus is on flourishing, the purpose of this paper is to explore contented rather than stressed educators and look for sources of happiness in their workplace. The present qualitative case study investigates instructor wellbeing at a language institution in the private sector and how it is promoted at the institutional level. This is in line with the collective approach according to which wellbeing is a shared responsibility of the individual and the institution in which they are inserted (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

Literature Review

Positive Psychology and Its Focus on the Positive

Positive Psychology (PP), defined as "the scientific study of what goes right in life" (Peterson, 2006, p. 4) is a new branch of psychology created by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). It focuses on the positive aspects of human experience, unlike traditional psychology, which concentrates on the negative, such as mental illnesses or disorders and their treatment. PP looks at human wellbeing and explores how people can function to the best of their potential (Malczewska-Webb, 2016, p. 194). Its goal is to study factors that promote a good life, successful relationships, and engaging institutions (MacIntyre, 2021).

There are three pillars of PP: positive emotions, positive individual characteristics, and positive institutions, also labeled enabling institutions. The third, least well-studied pillar has been defined as "organizational structures that enable success and promote positive language learning environments" (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014, p. 165). As Gabryś-Barker (2016) observed, positive institutions are concerned not just with grades and graduation rates, but with the affective growth and wellbeing of both students and educators. She highlighted that:

Studying school as an enabling institution becomes one of important dimensions of present day research, especially with the advent of positive psychology in a language learning and teaching context. (Gabryś-Barker, 2016, p. 156)

Positive institutions have been the least well-studied out of the three PP pillars. As MacIntyre and Mercer (2014) pointed out, "in SLA research, greater care is now being taken to describe the contexts in which learning occurs, especially at the classroom level" (p. 165). Therefore, scholars have called for more studies of positive or enabling institutions.

Teacher Wellbeing

Wellbeing is defined from the hedonic perspective as "gaining pleasure and avoiding pain with the aim to maximize happiness" (Mercer, 2020b, p. 2). From the eudemonic point of view, on the other hand, wellbeing is related to finding a sense of meaning in life, a chance to grow and develop. It is reflected in PERMA, Seligman's (2011) model of flourishing which stands for Positive emotion, Engagement, positive interpersonal Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.

Teacher wellbeing has been gaining attention over the last few years and its importance has been highlighted by many scholars. As Mercer (2020b) points out, "teacher wellbeing is desirable for teachers themselves as well as for their learners" (p. 2). First of all, teacher wellbeing is "central to their ability to teach to their full potential" (MacIntyre et al., 2019, p. 26), and to "perceive themselves as better teachers" (Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021, p. 3). When educators are in good mental and physical health, they find it easier to manage the daily challenges of language teaching (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021) and they have better relationships with both colleagues and learners (Mercer, 2020a). Additionally, "happy and healthy teachers are much more likely to blossom in all aspects of their lives, including relationships in work and beyond" (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020, p. 2). This means there is also less risk of burnout (Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021) and teachers quitting the profession (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Teachers whose wellbeing is at a high level are more motivated, feel more positive about their institution and students (Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021), and experience fewer discipline issues (Jin et al., 2021; Mercer, 2020b). According to Fredrickson's (2013) broaden-and-build theory, when teachers are in a positive state, their minds broaden, which allows them to think more creatively and thus, become more effective and innovative.

Furthermore, since teacher and student wellbeing are two sides of the same coin (Roffey, 2012) teacher wellbeing positively affects student wellbeing and is linked to study effects (Jin et al., 2021; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Moskowitz and Dewaele's (2021) research on the influence of teacher wellbeing on student feelings and attitudes has demonstrated that "teachers who emanate happiness and clearly enjoy teaching strengthen their students' motivation and attitudes toward the FL" (cited in Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021, p. 9).

Teacher Stressors

So far, teacher stressors have been much better researched than sources of instructor wellbeing. Typical sources of educators' stress include excessive workload (Barbieri et al., 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Talbot & Mercer, 2018), long hours (MacIntyre et al., 2019), poor relationships with colleagues, lack of suitable resources, constant changes within the profession (Barbieri et al., 2019), inadequate salaries (Barbieri et al., 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2019), poor physical environment (Babic et al., 2022; Guglielmi et al. 2012; Mercer, 2020b), organizational conditions of schools context (Fiorilli et al., 2015), being evaluated by others, lack of support (Kyriacou, 2001), conflict with students' parents, blurry boundaries between work and home (MacIntyre et al., 2019), discipline, lack of student motivation (Wieczorek, 2016), and authoritarian management style (Babic et al., 2022).

Apart from the stressors that may affect all teachers, the research has identified some specific foreign or second language teacher stressors, such as heterogeneous groups, lack of equipment and teaching aids (Wieczorek, 2016), high intercultural demands (Mercer et al., 2016), low linguistic self-efficacy (L2 teachers) (Horwitz, 1996), lack of explicit linguistic knowledge (L1 teachers) (Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021) extensive emotional labor (Gkonou & Miller, 2017), energy-intense methodologies promoting communication (Borg, 2006), unstable working conditions, for example, lack of job security (Talbot & Mercer, 2018), low prestige, scheduling, being called on to cover, lack of technology, the rigidity of following a set coursebook, and seasonal work (in summer schools) (Mercer, 2020b). As Piechurska-Kuciel (2011, p. 219) has speculated, "the demands a FL teacher has to face in their work greatly exceed obligations of a teacher of any other subject, which may constitute a significant cause of more pronounced burnout levels."

Additionally, recent research suggests that stressors experienced by private school FL teachers may be particularly acute since they tend to be exploited by greedy owners, usually work on zero hours contracts, and yet must meet high student expectations as paying customers. As Mercer (2020b, p. 4) states:

The reason this group is especially important to understand is that they often have very little practical, structural or union-type support. Their working conditions are often very intense, with a high turnover of students and limited perspectives for promotion, professional development, or job security. Their status as educators and professionals is often more precarious than for those working in the state sector and they are typically employed without any medical care, paid sick leave, holiday leave, or pension provision.

Sources of Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher wellbeing has been demonstrated to be enhanced by opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD), the availability of educational resources (Barbieri et al., 2019), positive social relations with administrators, parents, and colleagues (Butt & Retallick, 2002), teacher identification with the school's values (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011), a supportive school climate (Babic et al., 2022; Day et al., 2007), motivated colleagues, good rapport with managers and students, autonomy, involvement in decision-making, physical space, and a sense of purpose and meaning of one's work stemming from students' progress and achievements (Babic et al., 2022).

Mercer, who (2000b) investigated a private school context of English language teaching in Malta, found that a positive school environment and work climate may be sources of instructor happiness. Teachers were positively affected by good relationships with their colleagues who were willing to share materials and help one another in teaching preparations. Additionally, hard-working, fair, and respectful bosses, described as role models, who set a good example, were appreciated by staff members. Instructors found it particularly helpful when their boss had an understanding attitude to scheduling and allowed them to teach their preferred groups of students. Teachers also drew positivity from autonomy and involvement in the decision-making process. They valued continuous professional development (CPD) activities but believed that they should be paid for by their employer.

Teacher-student relationships and student progress and enjoyment also turned out to be salient sources of teacher wellbeing, which was in line with Mercer and Gregersen's (2020) statement that happy students are usually more rewarding and motivating to teach. As far as physical aspects were concerned, instructors were generally happier in small set-ups, promoting a sense of belonging.

The Dominance of the Negative in Language Teacher Wellbeing (LTWB) Research

Language teacher psychology and language teacher wellbeing, in particular, has only recently become the subject of empirical research (Babic et al., 2022; Gregersen et al. 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer, 2020b; Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021). These few studies have mostly focused on the negative aspects of teacher wellbeing, mainly teacher stressors (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer, 2020b). Wellbeing sources have to this point been understudied (Budzińska, 2018, 2021; Mercer, 2020b; Dewaele & Proietti Ergün, 2021). LTWB has so far been researched by Babic et al. (2022), Mercer (2020b), and marginally by Budzińska (2018, 2021). At present, it appears that there is no published empirical case study of an institution investigating its effect on LTWB. Mercer (2020b) has called for research in this area, adding that "any examination of teacher wellbeing must also look at organizational variables, the quality of social relationships, especially with school leaders, and the various forms of social capital that teachers can potentially draw on" (p. 4). Additionally, the third positive psychology pillar, positive institutions, has been neglected in research with only scarce exceptions (Babic et al., 2022; Budzińska, 2018, 2021). Nevertheless, MacIntyre (2021, p. 6) have recently stated:

> It would be a significant contribution if positive psychology could help articulate and evaluate the principles to help establish policy that has an impact on classrooms to facilitate the flourishing of both students and teachers alike.

The present study aims to fill the gap in research by focusing on the presence, rather than the absence of wellbeing, which is in line with the positive psychology philosophy. It is the first case study investigating language institutions in the private sector through the lens of instructor wellbeing.

The Status of ELT Teachers in the Polish Context

It is not possible to understand a Polish English language teaching institution without looking at the historical situation and its effect on the status of English language and English language teachers in Poland. Until the fall of communism in 1989, Poland was under the influence of the Soviet regime, which meant that Russian was an obligatory foreign language in every school. Other languages were also taught, but usually, the courses were less intensive

and started in high school. The English language was associated with the dream of the Western world depicted in American movies. There were not many English teachers in those days, but those who were graduates of that niche, prestigious faculty of English, were also associated with that dream and therefore highly respected. Even though English language is widely taught these days and teacher status is not as high as it used to be, an English teacher's job is still considered a respectable profession unlike in the UK, where the status of language teachers is very low (Meiritsch et al., 2021).

Private Language Schools in Poland

The study was conducted at a private language school of English in Poland where languages are generally taught in two types of contexts: state schools and private language schools. The private sector complements state schools and plays a vital role in language education. Classes at state schools are obligatory and free and usually take place in the morning, while private school lessons are usually taught in the afternoon and are paid for. Many learners study a foreign language in both contexts. They are often sent by their parents to attend private language school classes in addition to their state school lessons to increase their hours of language learning. Private language tuition is also popular because of the general belief that its quality is higher than state school tuition, which partly results from student and parent expectations as paying customers. Another group of learners are adults who studied a foreign language at state schools in the past and who want to refresh or expand their knowledge. There is also a small group of customers who studied one language in state schools and are learning another one from scratch.

Although private schools do not usually offer permanent contracts with paid sick leave, holiday leave, medical care, or pension provision, this is not an issue for many Polish teachers who are employed full time at states institutions and work part-time in the private sector on zero hours contracts to earn extra money. The hourly rate at private schools tends to be higher than at state schools, which has attracted another group of teachers to work freelance for them and pay their own medical or pension contributions. Although the school researched in the present paper runs on a for-profit basis and belongs to the private sector, it is owned by a state university, which makes the set-up somewhat different from a typical private language school.

Methodology

This study seeks to explore factors contributing to the wellbeing of language teachers working for a school in the private sector. In order to do this, the following research questions were posed:

- Research question 1: Does the school promote teacher wellbeing?
- Research question 2: Which aspects of the institution contribute to the language teacher wellbeing?
- Research question 3: What aspects of the institution contribute to teacher stress?

Participants

All of the school's fifteen instructors and the director of studies participated in this study. Twelve were Polish nationals, three were British. Their average age was 48. There were ten females and five males. Four of the teachers were full-time employees. Eleven were part-timers, working for other institutions as well. On average the teachers had worked for the school for 20 years. Their overall average period of language teaching experience was 24 years. The director of studies was also a teacher at the institution and participated in the study as a manager and an instructor.

Research Instruments and Procedure

Data were gathered through two open-ended questionnaires, Zoom interviews with the teachers and the director of studies, and participant observation. Questionnaires were chosen as the best means of maximizing responses as they could be completed at the instructors' convenience. In addition, they guaranteed anonymity, increasing the likelihood of honest responses. The first questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisted of a biodata section and an open-ended question. Its purpose was to find out whether the school was a positive workplace from the instructors' point of view, and what contributed to its positivity or negativity. The author sent an email to teachers informing them about the purpose of the study, what they were expected to do, and how data will be used and stored. They were assured anonymity and explained that their names would be changed to protect their confidentiality. The teachers were requested to read and sign the consent sheet attached to the email. The participants were asked to complete the first questionnaire and put it in a specially designated box in their staff room. All teachers completed the questionnaires, however, three

of them gave yes/no answers without providing any justification. One of them explained that they were too busy for open-ended questionnaires.

The second questionnaire was designed to gather more details on the data obtained by the first questionnaire (see Appendix B). It was posted online using Google Forms. The link was emailed to all teachers together with a request to take part. All teachers responded to the second questionnaire, however, some of them gave very short answers.

The questionnaires were followed by Zoom interviews with four teachers who accepted an invitation (see questions in Appendix C). The interviews were organized to find out more details about the school's corporate culture, history and organization, and their influence on the instructors' wellbeing. Teachers proved eager to contribute and got very engaged constructively in the conversations, which lasted 140 minutes in total. Even though only four instructors volunteered to be interviewed, the author feels that the data are representative of the team because they are consistent with the findings obtained through questionnaires and with the general attitude of teachers that the author observed as a participant. The fact that only four participants responded to the invitation is attributed to constraints on the instructors' time.

After the interviews with the teachers had taken place, the director of studies was asked for a Zoom interview. Since the study was examining institutional, systemic variables affecting the wellbeing of staff, the author felt the research could not be complete without considering the manager who is largely responsible for the policies and organization of the workplace and, consequently, the staff's job satisfaction. The director agreed to participate, and the meeting was arranged. The one-shot interview followed an interview protocol, the questions were grouped into three main sections: the institution's policy promoting teacher wellbeing, teacher welfare, the manager's attitude toward teacher wellbeing, and her involvement in the school's social life. The interview (see questions in Appendix D) lasted 29 minutes. Both teachers and the director of studies consented to the Zoom meetings being recorded. The total data corpus was 19,210 words.

The author had worked for this school as a teacher for twenty years, hence she had been a member of the population she studied. Therefore, to complement other qualitative instruments, she implemented participant observation. In this type of method, "a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001, p. 1). Insider research carries several benefits. As Trowler (2011) states, "you have better access both to naturalistic data and to respondents; you are better able to produce 'emic' accounts (ones meaningful to actors), especially using an ethnographic approach; you are better able to use natural-

istic data, critical discourse analysis and phenomenography, because you are 'culturally literate'" (p. 2).

Being familiar with the context enabled the author to better understand the participant responses, and analyze and interpret the data. As Dwyer & Buckle (2009) point out, "This insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered" (p. 58). Since being a member of the group under investigation may influence the research in a negative way, the author had to stay detached and be constantly aware of her own personal biases and perspectives. The fact that the researcher did not work for the institution anymore when the study was conducted helped the author to stay neutral. It also increased the likelihood of receiving sincere answers to interview questions.

Analysis

The interviews transcribed by means of Otter.ai and narratives from open-ended questionnaires were manually coded and analyzed by the author and an external researcher. To analyze the data, a grounded theory approach was taken (Charmaz, 2006). As Charmaz (2006) explains, the approach allows systematic but flexible data analysis to formulate theories "grounded in the data themselves" (p. 181). The author and her colleague read the narratives separately looking for themes or categories, which in this study were institutional sources of teacher wellbeing. Once all of the categories were identified, the two researchers went over the transcripts and narratives again, assigning units of analysis to categories. After reviewing and coding the transcripts, the themes were compared by the two researchers. Any inconsistencies regarding interpretation and categorization were discussed and resolved.

Findings

Research Question 1: Does the School Promote Teacher Wellbeing?

All fifteen teachers state in unanimity that the school is a positive workplace promoting their wellbeing, which is further supported by the fact that the staff turnover is very low, and the average employment period is of 20 years (see Participants section). As Tobiasz highlighted, "Once you work there, you want to work there and continue working there for many years."

Research Question 2: Which Aspects of the Institution Contribute to the Language Teacher Wellbeing?

The results addressing the second research question are presented under headings representing the main themes which emerged from the analysis. The findings have been accompanied by excerpts from the narratives and interviews.

CPD

The school has a long tradition of incorporating a comprehensive professional development program, which consists of yearly observations by the director of studies or one of two teacher-trainers, yearly peer-observations, a yearly training weekend, and training at the beginning of each school year. Teacher observations focus on a different aspect each year and are followed by in-depth oral and written feedback. Peer observations concentrate on the same theme as formal observations. Observers have to complete a specially designed feedback form explaining how a given aspect of teaching has been realized and hand in the form to the management team and the colleague observed. As for the training weekend, it is organized in an attractive nearby village. It is free with food and accommodation provided. Training sessions are delivered by the school's teacher trainers as well as teachers and occasionally guest teacher-trainers (interviews, participant observation).

The teachers seem to be very enthusiastic about the CPD provided by the school. Agata highlighted that she benefitted from it greatly. As Tobiasz pointed out, "there is a lot of scope for professional development offered by this school." Izyda highlighted that "not only is there a substantial amount of training at this institution, but its quality is at an utmost level." Only one of the teachers said that "teacher development could be improved a little by organizing more workshops, and sponsoring more conferences."

The main teacher trainer of the school is a resource writer and a leading trainer in the country, who draws from the most recent trends in foreign language acquisition and converts them into classroom activities that she first tests with her own students. Consequently, teacher training sessions demonstrate innovative, practical activities. Additionally, they address issues detected during class observations and peer observations. The sessions delivered by other teachers present hands-on, already tried classroom activities. Teachers are typically asked to engage in the presented activities, such that they can experience them from the student's point of view and, thus, develop an opinion about their usefulness. Moreover, actively participating in these activities is meant

to help teachers understand them and facilitate their future implementation (researcher's insider knowledge).

Apart from taking part in CPDs provided by the school, instructors are expected to participate in external teacher-training events, for example, conferences for teachers (Tobiasz). Instructors who wish to develop themselves professionally can also take advantage of a well-equipped (Izyda) resource library or request a book to be purchased by the school (Bożena).

Agata: We have a wide range of supplementary materials available.

Bożena: I am very impressed with our constantly updated resource library and the fact that everything is bought when requested.

Additionally, Bożena pointed out that "you can develop yourself thanks to contact with experienced teachers." As she observed, staff-room discussions typically relate to lesson preparation and sharing ideas and are as valuable as formal CPD.

Workplace Culture

The positive corporate culture at the school seems to be strictly connected to its history. Founded in the 1990s by the British Council, the institution has a long tradition of being the best in the city. When it was opened, people queued all night for enrolment as there were far more prospective students than the school could hold (researcher's insider knowledge).

Since the school promotes self-growth, many of its instructors have developed to become experts in the field—DELTA holders, certified teacher-trainers, Cambridge ESOL examiners, as well as ELT material writers (researcher's insider knowledge). Consequently, members of staff feel proud and privileged to be part of this team (teacher interviews). Both the school's prestigious past and the high qualifications of its current teachers enhance staff morale, motivation, and the general work atmosphere. All these contribute to the overall drive for professionalism. Everybody makes an effort to fit in with the school profile. Participants also mention peer motivation which Klementyna referred to as "positive competition." Tobiasz explained how other teachers motivate him:

We motivate one another by example. We can see that other people are striving to be the best in our profession and we just want to be like them.

Furthermore, instructors spoke very highly of the vibes in the staff room, where teachers "are eager to help each other," plan lessons together, and happily exchange ideas and materials. An ongoing quality conversation makes the workplace truly professional.

> Agata: We talk about teaching all the time but I think that we talk about it because we share ideas and materials and it is always like "Oh, I have a lesson on whatever," and then everybody has, you know, some kind of an idea, "You could do this, you could do that, this book, that book."

> Izyda: We are really great as a team, yes, as a group and I suppose, for everybody it is really, really pleasant to come to the teachers' room and to share different things, to share different ideas or stories about students, or stories from private life, wherever, but it is a really, really friendly atmosphere.

> Klementyna: I had an episode of working for another leading private school in town. I could not believe the boss was constantly chatting with teachers about fashion! I was missing the ongoing professional conversation.

Additionally, teachers declared that they identify themselves with the institution and are supportive of its policy, which, as one of the instructors pointed out, is not the case in every school.

> Tobiasz: I couldn't stress it enough. The place has made me: who I am and what I represent in my professional skills.

Organization and Management

The school is run in a democratic manner. All strategies, changes, and new policies are discussed during staff meetings and subsequently subject to majority voting (participant observation), which makes teachers feel an integral part of the institution. Agata explained:

> I have always felt I can have my say in a lot of things and my suggestions are taken into account when it comes to making the school policy. By being involved in decision-making we are more connected to the place and feel the place is also our responsibility.

The present Director of Studies, for example, was selected from among the teachers by vote (researcher's insider knowledge). The narratives demonstrate the teachers' appreciation of the boss and reflect the positive relationship between her and the instructors:

Tobiasz: The boss is very dedicated and does her best. The place wouldn't be the same without her.

Klementyna: The boss is approachable and accessible, mostly among us in the staff room. She has a separate room adjoining the teachers' room and when she is there the door is usually open. When I worked for another school, each time I wanted to speak to the boss, he told me to send him an email. At my other workplace, the boss shuts herself in a room with an access code, which has made me appreciate what I otherwise would have considered normal.

Izyda: This is a positive workplace thanks to a friendly atmosphere and a good rapport between the management and teachers.

Agata: The management is very employee-friendly. I have never felt any negativity coming from the management.

Autonomy, which is a major source of job satisfaction for some instructors, plays a vital role at this institution. Teachers can choose levels (Bożena), coursebooks, and the extent to which they want to exploit them. There is no rigidity in following the coursebook. The only uniformity that exists regards the number of tests and written assignments (participant observation). Furthermore, instructors' preferences about the days they wish to teach and the number of hours are taken into consideration (Tobiasz). Substitutions are paid for and not imposed upon, therefore teachers who wish to earn extra money volunteer for them. Instructors appreciate the rule that the substituted teacher prepares the lessons and gives the lesson plan and materials to the substituting teacher (researcher's insider knowledge).

Bożena: For me, this is the best working environment I've ever worked in—my personal space is respected and my preferences for selecting the level of teaching are considered prior to giving me classes before each academic year begins.

Klementyna: I love the feeling of freedom owing to the choice of dates of my classes. This flexibility has had a positive effect on my family life. The fact that I can choose a coursebook and use one that matches my teaching

style makes me feel comfortable. I also value the fact that all of us teachers are involved in the policy-making of our school.

Izyda: I get to choose the number of groups and the days I teach so I can't complain.

Tobiasz: The management has confidence in me. I get to decide about pretty much everything.

Teaching Experience

Instructors unanimously state that the comfort of teaching at this school is very high primarily thanks to small, homogenous groups and attractive, well-equipped classrooms. According to the school policy, the number of students per group must not exceed 12. In practice, many classes consist of 5–7 students (participant observation). As Klementyna points out, a small class size reduces the risk of discipline issues and facilitates the implementation of the communicative approach to language teaching. It also makes it easier to tailor seating arrangements to language activities and smoothly switch between pair-work, group-work, and mingling. Group homogeneity has been achieved through written and oral placement testing and creating groups at ten levels of advancement from elementary to post-proficiency. Furthermore, during the first few lessons, teachers are encouraged to verify the level of the classes they are teaching and move learners up or down in order to minimize the differences between proficiency levels (researcher's insider knowledge). Consequently, as Bożena observed:

Unlike at some other schools where I have taught, instructors here have the comfort of being able to concentrate on teaching, rather than managing mixed levels and differentiation.

Instructors also believe that the physical aspect of the school contributes to their wellbeing as well: the classrooms are clean, and well-kept with U-shaped desks. They are equipped with interactive whiteboards, computers, OHPs, and an Internet connection. As Agata commented: "I do like to have a lot of technology. I am this gadget freak and the technology available is more than adequate. I really like the fact that the school is pro-technology." The desks are small, light, and easily movable to form a horseshoe, islands, and other types of layout. Each classroom has a name badge related to the culture of

English-speaking countries with corresponding photographs hanging on the walls (participant observation).

Furthermore, the learners' attitude and engagement stemming from their motivation contribute to the positive teaching experience. When asked about learner motivation, Tobiasz explained:

> The students feel the special atmosphere in our school. This makes them want to learn. By showing them that we take our responsibilities seriously we show them that we want them to make progress and they appreciate it. We care more than teachers in other schools.

Physical Aspect and Resources

The school is a modern, well-kept, bungalow with proper lighting and is kept at a comfortable temperature. The staff room is equipped with a wide range of constantly updated teaching and teacher development resources, stationery, two photocopiers, a computer, and a printer (participant observation). The instructors speak very highly of the available resources:

> Tobiasz: The resources are sufficient and adequate.

> Bożena: What I really like about this job is the opportunity to access new teaching resources and materials.

> Izyda: The teaching resources are excellent here.

The school promotes cooperation and sharing. The teachers have always been encouraged to put any supplementary resources or activities in special files dedicated to particular coursebooks (researcher's insider knowledge). Instructors found such shared resources extremely helpful in planning. As Klementyna noticed,

> The shared resources save your time. They make your lessons more varied and interesting. They are also great for professional development. When I was new at the school, the shared resources helped me fit in with the style of the school. They also gave me lots of ideas for classroom activities that I continue using.

Apart from sharing resources the instructors also share ideas. Izyda mentioned a big poster in the staffroom, where instructors put new ideas for activities or useful websites they have discovered. She commented that the poster is an invaluable source of inspiration, which enhances her lessons.

The fact that the school has many features more associated with a home has been reported as a boost to instructors' wellbeing. Opposite the teachers' room, there is a lounge with a sofa, a kitchenette with a fridge, a microwave, a kettle, and a coffee machine. Tea and coffee are always provided (participant observation). As Agata commented, "All these facilities help us feel comfortable and make a long working day more manageable." Apart from the physical aspects of the school, which contribute to instructor wellbeing, teachers took pride in describing facilities that their school offered to its customers such as a lobby with tables for students to socialize or do homework; a reception area with a library and a quiet space for self-study.

Generally, instructors are pleased with the physical aspect of the institution. Klementyna pointed out that she particularly appreciated it in comparison with other institutions that did not guarantee the same standard:

> I had a short episode of working for a different private language school and only then I began to appreciate what I took for granted when working here. The building was scruffy with peeling paintwork and old furniture. To get to the school area of the building I had to get through an unpleasant, run-down staircase, which put me off teaching. To make things worse, the classrooms were cold in winter!

Remuneration and Perks

Salaries, described by one of the teachers as "competitive," are within the top range for the private language schools (researcher's insider knowledge) and most teachers (twelve out of fifteen) consider them to be satisfactory. What is different from other schools is that the pay rate is transparent and depends on the type of course and level, which, as teachers commented eliminates the rat race, encourages professional development, and is fair. There are usually opportunities to earn more money for placement testing, and exam practice weekends (researcher's insider knowledge). Yet, instructors feel nostalgic about the early days of the school, when remuneration was much more attractive in comparison with statutory pay.

Even though there has been little increase in salaries over the last few years (Kuba), the school offers free tuition for teachers' family members. Klementyna said she was very appreciative of the perk and admitted that her daughter had studied at the school for five years from an elementary to advanced level. Additionally, the school subsidizes the taking of development courses such as the Cambridge Delta preparation course. Most of the teachers have enhanced their qualifications thanks to this perk (researcher's insider knowledge).

The most meaningful comment came from Tobiasz, who said that this school offers him far more than money.

Social Life

A naturally occurring, non-imposed social life among the teachers contributes to teacher wellbeing. There are several regular occasions when teachers meet outside work (interviews). One of them is a Christmas party organized by the boss at her own home. After the final meeting at the end of each school year, all teachers go out for a meal at a restaurant. Every summer, there are garden parties with barbeques organized by members of staff (participant observation). Teachers come to garden parties with their families and, as one of them reported: "Children enjoy playing with one another as if in one, large family." During the training weekend (see Professional Development), there is a party with team games and quizzes. Strong bonds between instructors result in what Agata described as "a close-knit teachers' community" and "the second home." Some members of staff have become friends or even, as Agata put it, "friends for life" and meet outside work, go together on holiday. Klementyna, who brought her boyfriend to one of the events said, "My boyfriend told me that the school feels like a social club, rather than a school," which appropriately sums up the atmosphere and relationships at this workplace. Some of the instructors have become more established at other institutions but they continue working for the school part-time, because of their "sentiment and affection for the place in general."

Interview with the Director of Studies

The director of studies said she cared about the wellbeing of her staff. When asked about the methods she used to promote it, she explained:

I promote it mainly by speaking to people and finding out what their needs are and what their worries are as well and I think it's very important that the director of studies is available for teachers um, even for private matters. It doesn't have to be only strictly connected with teaching, but I think they need to know that there is somebody that they can always talk to, um, it's kind of management by walking around, yes, and by being with people as much as possible and responding to their anxieties on the go.

Maria added that it is essential that teachers have everything they need: good quality classrooms, good quality equipment, and a sufficient number of books that can be used as extra materials. Furthermore, she highlighted the significance of CPD:

It's important that people take part in webinars, conferences, so they can listen to other ideas of other people, and this gives them a spark to change something in their own teaching and this is motivating cause there is nothing worse than repeating the same things every year, the same textbook, the same exercises, the same methodology. I think it leads to burnout sooner or later, so there needs to be new fresh air that might come from these kinds of training or talking to other teachers.

Maria revealed that promoting social life was her conscious policy as the head of school:

It's important that people like each other, that they share parts of their private lives, so it is important to go out together, to have barbecues, to have this Christmas party that I'm organizing at my house because this links people and when they are linked, they are more eager to cooperate, and the atmosphere is not as tense as it could have been otherwise.

The director of studies observed that her effort has paid off because her staff do not seem to treat the school just as a place of work where you come and go as quickly as possible but they like talking to each other and are keen on each other's company. She added that she also genuinely enjoyed socializing with them: "I love meeting the teachers privately, I love laughing and dancing with them, it's not just part of my duties, but it is also a pleasure."

Research question 3: What aspects of the institution contribute to teacher stress?

The first questionnaire did not reveal any sources of stress. Teachers mentioned several stress factors only when asked specifically to do so in the second questionnaire. Three instructors said that their main source of stress was using technology, or rather, as Agata put it, "expectations related to state-of-the-art technology." Two teachers expressed a wish for a designated technical support person to help with issues related to technology and thus, reduce a substantial amount of stress. As Bożena pointed out, "there's nothing worse than discovering that the equipment is not working just when you are about to start the class and you don't know how to fix it."

Time-consuming class preparation was another stressor mentioned by two instructors. Teachers at this institution make an effort to meet the students' expectations and fit in with a high standard of teaching. As Agata reported, "The only stressor I can think of is the number of hours I have to put in in terms of preparation for classes."

Kuba, who despite being a full-time member of staff, works freelance with a contract renewed each year revealed that "job insecurity is an issue and so is lack of benefits and no pay rise in years." Additionally, even though instructors generally agreed they benefitted from quality teacher training offered by the school, there was one negative comment that there was "too much CPD for experienced teachers because self-motivated teachers do not need so much supervision." Contrary to this, Bożena, who was a less experienced instructor, observed: "Teacher training could be improved a little by organizing more workshops." She added that "sponsoring more conferences" would make a difference since not all teachers can afford them.

Discussion

The study has identified and demonstrated institutional features that truly matter to teachers, contribute to their professional wellbeing, and help them to thrive as FL instructors. The crucial source of the teachers' job satisfaction seems to be a wide range of free, quality teacher training opportunities, which have enabled the teachers to develop and achieve excellence that they are proud of. In addition, the teachers' contentment results from being a part of a dedicated team of experts that motivate and support each other professionally.

Teacher-friendly, democratic management is another key source of the instructors' wellbeing. The teachers value their boss's availability and ap-

proachability as well as the fact that they are involved in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the team feel that the school policies contribute to their enjoyment by allowing instructors abundant autonomy as well as the influence on their timetable, and a degree of flexibility regarding dates of classes. This family-friendly approach helps teachers reconcile work with life and also with other jobs.

Additionally, school policies regarding small class size and careful place-ment together with the provision of appropriate physical conditions, equipment, and free resources have a positive effect on the instructor teaching experience (Mercer, 2020b), which is further enhanced thanks to motivated learners at-tracted by the institution's reputation. School experience outside teaching time also seems to be uplifting as a result of the institution's home-like features and the positive atmosphere, which stems from instructors' enjoyment and strong bonds between the staff members. The "close-knit teachers' community" (ques-tionnaire) is a result of the manager's conscious effort to promote team building. Last but not least are the adequate salaries and perks, making instructors feel that their work is appreciated. All these features give the instructors a sense of belonging and identification with the institution (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011), which appears to be an essential element of their professional wellbeing.

Unlike previous study results on LTWB that focus on mainly teacher stressors (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer, 2020b) and look more marginally at uplifts, this research presents us with thriving teachers, experiencing good wellbeing. The participants are unanimous in terms of their enjoyment of the workplace and do not mention any negativity unless prompted, even though they must experience typical stressors embedded in the language teaching profession, like emotional labor (Mercer, 2020b) or insecurities related to one's second language (Horwitz, 1996). This could signify that prevailing wellbeing overshadowed any job-related anxiety and resulted in an overall positive mind-set. Only when asked precisely about stressors in the follow-up questionnaire did the participants enumerate several downsides that were not critical for their overall wellbeing (Babic et al., 2022).

The samples did not demonstrate that they were affected by general teacher stressors found in previous research, with the exception of technology (Mercer, 2020b), which in this institution was available, yet, not always reliable. As far as stressors more specific to private language school teachers are concerned, job insecurity and lack of benefits were mentioned by two full-time, self-employed freelance staff members, which is consistent with previous research run in the private sector (Mercer, 2020b). Another similarity was the tension resulting from students or their parents who are paying customers with high expectations (Mercer, 2020b). On the contrary, other factors contributing to teacher stress that were found in previous research, such as teacher status, ac-cess to resources, physical and organizational conditions or student motivation

(Wieczorek, 2016) were in this school considered as causes of positive emotions, rather than tension. Furthermore, uplifts found in previous research (Babic et al., 2022; Mercer, 2020b), such as staff relationships, rapport with the manager, autonomy, and CPD, were observed in the present research as well.

This case study results are different from Mercer's (2020b), who also conducted research in a private sector context. There are several reasons why this contradiction manifests itself in this institution. Firstly, the difference may be attributed to the historically higher status of English language teachers in Poland. As Mercer (2020b referring to Buunk and Ybema, 1997) highlighted, professional status and prestige are important for staff wellbeing. Secondly, the school is in the private sector but belongs to an institution rather than a private owner, therefore it is not so obvious that the business is run on a for-profit basis—there is no evidence of greed and willingness to exploit teachers (Sullivan, 2014). On the contrary, as one of the teachers observed, this institution's priorities are team spirit, professionalism, and self-development of the staff. Thirdly, the school has an excellent reputation, a prestigious origin, and a long tradition of good practices, which boosts staff morale. Additionally, most teachers have permanent jobs elsewhere and therefore are not nervous about a potential lack of stability. Besides, the fact that they have worked for this school on average for 20 years suggests that job security is not a point of concern at this workplace.

The study demonstrates how an institution can contribute to teacher wellbeing at the systemic level by depicting a well-functioning language school in the private sector in Poland. It is hoped that the study will help policy-makers acknowledge teachers' needs. Previous research has shown that not all language institutions recognize the importance of teacher wellbeing (Mercer, 2020b; Wickham, 2015). Hopefully, this paper will make a contribution toward educational leaders realizing the value of a satisfied team of teachers. Leaders should recognize the invaluable amount of enthusiasm, engagement and dedication teacher wellbeing generates, which will surely translate into student achievement and joy of learning. Perhaps this study will persuade those unconvinced managers and policy-makers to revisit their principles and begin recognizing and addressing their staff's needs. The good practice emerging from the research could serve as guidelines for educational institutions in all contexts, the primary objective of which should be to maintain teacher wellbeing (Maslach & Leiter, 1999).

This is the second study in this under-researched context after Mercer's (2020b) ecological research of language teachers working in the private sector in Malta. Research from other countries where English is taught as a foreign language in the private sector would shed more light on systemic factors promoting or detracting from teacher wellbeing. Another salient research avenue would be looking at teachers of other languages working in the private sector.

The body of research that will hopefully grow will benefit FL teachers and their learners as well as managers and institution owners.

Conclusion

The results demonstrate how the institution enables teachers to flourish, thanks to its positive culture, policies, organization, management, opportunities for professional growth, social life, as well as adequate resources and physical working conditions. This is consistent with Mercer's (2020b) argument that "systems, cultures, contexts, and policies can impact on individual wellbeing" (p. 3). It is remarkable that language teacher wellbeing was realized at this institution in a natural way, long before the arrival of positive psychology. For this reason, the institution embodies a long story of success.

Wellbeing is essential for teachers to thrive, to stay in the profession, to be in good physical and mental condition, and needs to be guaranteed by policy-makers and people in charge of educational institutions. Therefore, it is critical to demonstrate stress-provoking institution features that need healing. It is equally important to point out good practices that strengthen teacher wellbeing and empower instructors to enjoy their vocation despite the stressors which are inherent in their profession. This paper shows practices that matter to teachers, are appreciated by them, make them identify with the institution, and want to work for it. As Jin et al. (2021, p. 20) state,

> It is thus important to understand what enables teachers to flourish in their professional roles and what challenges can hinder their professional wellbeing. The implications need to create guidelines for institutions and policy makers to ensure that teachers are in the best position to be the best educators they can be.

Some of the positive features that make up the LTWB at this workplace, such as the school's well-established reputation, cannot be recreated elsewhere. Other, more universal facets, such as those related to the organization and management, could be easily implemented by other language schools in the private as well as the public sector for the benefit of teachers, their learners, and consequently workplace performance. Sometimes, all they require is a bit of goodwill, empathy, or a human approach.

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Katarzyna Budzińska

Das Wohlbefinden der Lehrer im Kontext einer privaten Sprachschule: Eine Fallstudie

Zusammenfassung

Das Wohlbefinden der Sprachlehrer im privaten Bildungssektor wurde bisher von der Forschung fast völlig vernachlässigt. Die vorliegende Studie nimmt eine gut funktionierende private Sprachschule unter die Lupe und analysiert die systemischen und kontextuellen Faktoren, die dazu beitragen, dass sich Lehrkräfte in ihrer Rolle entfalten können. Das Wohlbefinden der Lehrer wird auf Grundlage der Befragungen mit offenen Fragen, ausführlicher Interviews bzw. teilnehmender Beobachtung untersucht. Die Ergebnisse deuten auf mehrere Aspekte hin, die sich auf systemischer und institutioneller Ebene positiv auf das Wohlbefinden der Lehrkräfte auswirken, wie z. B. Unternehmenskultur, Arbeitsverfahren, Arbeitsorganisation, Management, berufliche Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten, zwischenmenschliche Kontakte, Unterrichtsmaterialien und -hilfen bzw. physische Arbeitsbedingungen. Die in der Studie beschriebenen guten Praktiken sind größtenteils universell und können in allen Kontexten des Sprachunterrichts angewandt werden. Dabei gibt es einige Faktoren, die sich besonders förderlich auf das Wohlbefinden der Lehrkräfte auswirken, allerdings sich nur schwer in anderen Einrichtungen wiederholen lassen.

Schlüsselwörter: Privatsektor, Lehrkräfte, Wohlbefinden, positive Psychologie, positive Institutionen, Sprachunterricht

Questionnaire 1

Personal information:
Age
Nationality
Gender
Number of years at the institution
Number of years as a language teacher
- Do you think X is a positive workplace (promoting teacher wellbeing)? Why?

Questionnaire 2

1. How do you feel about X student-friendly approach to evaluation (grades given in percentage, peer testing, descriptive final grade, possibility to retake every element of coursework)? Does it make your job less stressful? Why? Does it have a positive effect on your relationship with students? Please comment.

2. Do you tend to have a good relationship with X students? Where does it come from? (your conscious effort—give examples; student motivation, other reasons?)

3. How do you feel about your relationship with X management? Can you name any positive/negative aspects of it?

4. How do you feel about your relationship with X colleagues? Can you name any positive/negative aspects of it?

5. How do you feel about the student number and their level of homogeneity in your X classes?

6. Do you find X students motivated? Where do you think their motivation comes from?

7. How do you feel about the physical aspect of X?

8. How do you feel about X resources for teachers?

9. How do you feel about teacher development at X (observations, training sessions, conference)?

10. How do you feel about your autonomy at X (your influence on timetable days, times, dates, coursebook, level, workload, etc.)?

11. Do you feel you have sufficient autonomy within your classroom? Please comment/give examples.

12. How do you feel about X democracy in terms of policy-making, strategies, and changes (discussions and votes)?

13. Are there any stressors related to your teaching job at X? Can you name them? Does your enjoyment outweigh negative emotions? Please comment.

14. Do you teach at any other institution(s)? How does your wellbeing at that institution compare with your wellbeing at X?

15. How much do the following aspects of being an X teacher contribute to your job satisfaction?

1) small groups
2) homogenous group levels
3) motivated students
4) your relationship with students
5) your relationship with colleagues
6) your relationship with managers
7) your salary
8) teaching resources
9) opportunities for professional development
10) autonomy (influence on timetable, level, coursebook)
11) autonomy within your classroom
12) democratic decisions about school policies
13) student-friendly evaluation (peer-testing, grades in percentage)
14) physical aspect—building, classrooms
15) equipment/technology
16) atmosphere at work
17) Can you name any other sources of your job satisfaction?

Appendix C

Focus group meeting—Semi-structured interview questions

1) Do you think the school promotes teacher wellbeing? Why?
2) Do you think this school is prestigious? Why? Does it affect the way you feel about working there? Are you proud of working at this school because of its prestigious history?
3) How would you characterize the status of EL teachers in Poland? Why is it high/low? Has it changed?
4) Does the fact that the school is owned by an institution—University rather than a private owner—have an influence on working conditions/atmosphere?
5) How would you characterize the corporate culture of the institution? Is it different from other language schools? Do you think there are more professional conversations than at other schools?

6) There are some highly qualified members of staff—leading teacher trainers, coursebook writers, DELTA holders—does it influence the way you feel about this institution?
7) Do you think you have an influence on policy-making at this institution? Is it important for you?
8) Do you find the place professional?
9) How is CPD realized at this school? Does it help you develop professionally? Does professional development contribute to your wellbeing? Is it important for you?
10) Does the atmosphere positively affect your LTWB?
11) What can you say about your colleagues' motivation and commitment to the profession?
12) Can you observe peer motivation? Peer support?
13) Do you identify yourself with the institution?
14) Is there anything about the boss's style that has a positive/negative influence on your wellbeing?
15) Is the scheduling teacher-friendly?
16) How do you feel about the comfort of teaching? (small, homogenous groups, motivated students?)
17) What do you think of the physical aspect of the workplace—classrooms, staff room, other facilities, and resources?
18) What are your comments on social life? Does it contribute to your wellbeing?
19) Does your relationship with your students affect your wellbeing?
20) Is the salary adequate (in comparison with other schools)?
21) Do you experience any stressors related to this workplace?
22) Do positive aspects outweigh negative ones?

Appendix D

Interview with the Director of Studies

1) Do you care about teachers' wellbeing?
2) What do you do to promote it?
3) Apart from what you do does the school promote teacher wellbeing?
4) Do you think LTWB would be more difficult to promote if there was a private school owner instead of a state institution owner?
5) In what way the fact that it is a profit-driven institution affects LTWB?
6) Many members of staff remained loyal for over 20 years? What do you think has kept them?
7) Do you think the school's prestigious roots have affected LTWB?

8) The school had positive policies long before the arrival of positive psychology. How was it achieved?
9) What kind of contracts do teachers have?
10) Do you genuinely enjoy taking part in the school's social life?